

Dunwoody Appeals DeKalb Judge's Ruling Allowing Manget Way Eating Disorder Facility

The Manget Way debate is moving through the courts.

When neighbors discovered last year that a company called the Center for Discovery had purchased a house on Manget Way and planned to use it as a place to treat teenage girls with eating disorders, their reaction was "apoplectic at best," said lawyer **Josh Belinfante**, an attorney for the California-based company. They turned to city officials, who said the facility couldn't operate on the residential street.

Now a DeKalb judge has ruled the city was wrong to deny the company permission to open its facility.

City officials are appealing the decision. Belinfante on July 6 asked the court to reject the appeal, writing the court "should not expend its valuable resources assisting the city in its discriminatory, political game-playing."

"We should know soon if the Court of Appeals wants to take it," Belinfante said. "If they do, it would be another year or so [until the case is decided]. If they don't take it, then it's over."

He said his client looks forward to moving forward in obtaining necessary permits and opening the treatment facility because high-achieving kids need treatment. "My client has an interest in serving people in Dunwoody," he said.

Belinfante said the debate surrounding the Manget Way home grew from a misunderstanding. Before the company opens a new facility, it usually holds a public meeting with nearby residents to discuss the business and address any concerns. But, in this case, there wasn't time. "A neighbor walked over and talked to the sprinkler guy about what is going on," Belinfante said, and questions about and opposition to the project spread "like wildfire."

Manget Way residents protested to city officials. They argued the facility had wrongly been considered a personal care home instead of a medical treatment facility, which would be prohibited in a single-family neighborhood. Last June, the city's Zoning Board of Appeals ruled in the neighbors' favor.

But on May 27, DeKalb Superior Court Judge Clarence Seeliger reversed the ZBA decision. Ruling on an appeal filed by Belinfante, the judge said in his order that while the neighbors speculated the business would increase traffic, diminish their property values and disturb their peace and enjoyment, "these statements do not appear to be based on any evidence," Seeliger wrote.

At the time, the California company had no legal obligation to notify its neighbors about its intentions with the property, Belinfante said. Dunwoody City Council later voted to change the city code to require a special purpose land-use permit in similar situations. The application for the special permit would require public notice on the proposal and notifying the neighbors.

“Had we been notified, there may have been a different outcome,” Mark Collins, one of the neighbors involved in the lawsuit, said at a Jan. 26 City Council meeting.

Jennifer Gorman, operations director for the company, said it wants to have a small footprint in the affluent areas where facilities are opened. The company has opened 11 locations for treating eating disorders in five states. “We try to be unobtrusive and private,” Gorman said. “These kids are from great families and need quiet care in a nice neighborhood. The truth is that the clients and families that we serve are very similar in every way to the children and families that live in the neighborhoods we enter.”

But Page Love, a nutritionist for the Atlanta Center for Eating Disorders in Dunwoody, said she thinks the common assumption that affluent people are more often afflicted with eating disorders is wrong. She said she treats people of all socioeconomic statuses.

“I don’t think we can stereotype it as an affluent disorder anymore,” Love said.

Love said she thinks metro Atlanta needs more places that can treat teens with eating disorders. But she isn’t sure Dunwoody needs any more treatment options. “There’s a need for this and, overall, Atlanta is lacking in this kind of care, but Dunwoody is saturated [with providers],” she said.

In addition to the center in Dunwoody, a non-residential eating disorder treatment facility opened in Sandy Springs in 2013. The only metro area residential treatment option for women with eating disorders, she said, is the Ridgeview Institute in Smyrna. According to its website, the women’s center provides 24-hour nursing care, psychiatric stabilization, medical stabilization and detoxification in an inpatient setting.

The decision that a teenager needs around-the-clock care would be made by a medical doctor or in an emergency room, Love said. Once they are medically stable and able to follow outpatient treatment directions, teens with eating disorders could improve at home, she said.

If a teenager is incapable or unwilling to follow Love’s directions in outpatient therapy and he or she continues to lose weight, Love said she recommends residential treatment at Ridgeview.

“There are a lot more people seeking treatment than ever before,” Love said.